

Half Moon Bay Review

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Seabird population plummets on coast

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Two recovering seabird colonies on Devil's Slide Rock, also known as Egg Rock, faltered last year as populations dropped far more than their relatives anywhere else in the state. Biologists are calling the event a "total breeding failure."

By and large, year-to-year variations in marine life don't faze biologists who keep track of long-term patterns of environmental fluctuations. But when reproduction comes to a virtual halt, scientists worry. "It could just be a one-year change, but it's not something that we've seen out there before in over 40 years of working out there," said Pete Worzybok, a marine ecologist studying seabird populations on the Farallon Islands and at Devil's Slide. "We haven't seen this kind of disconnect before."

Brandt's cormorants at Devil's Slide raised zero fledglings successfully last spring, and a colony of common murres there took a precipitous drop as well, according to Gerry McChesney, Common Murre Restoration Project manager. McChesney is compiling the 2009 annual report and doesn't have specific numbers, but noted an "incredibly low nesting effort" and "big die-off" last year.

That's not to say that all seabirds had a dismal year. Thirteen species nest on the Farallons. Worzybok said about half did well and half did not.

For the murres and cormorants food was the most obvious problem. Anchovies weren't running as abundantly as anticipated, which raised a concern with biologists, given that ocean conditions were ripe for a productive year. Lulls typically coincide with El Niño, which didn't take effect until late last year, long after nesting time. Worrisome to biologists is the warmer water and more unpredictable weather rolling in this year.

"If it's just (that) 2009 was a bad year, it's nothing to worry about," said Wozybok, who called last year's variation "atypical." "But if we start to see this kind of failure over multiple years then we'd be in trouble. Then we'd have to try to think about other things we can do."

Dumping fish near the rock isn't an option, but scientists are intervening where they can to buffer the birds against human impact, which is a continuing concern.

Last August, in the midst of a major revamp to the state's near-shore regulations, the California Fish and Game Commission approved a special safe zone around Devil's Slide Rock. Effective in April, the zone bars boaters from coming within 300 feet of the rock. It's the first restriction of its kind at Devil's Slide, according to Marine Protection Act Senior Marine Biologist Supervisor Susan Ashcraft.

Another concern is aircraft flying in and out of Half Moon Bay Airport. Fly-bys, regardless of the noise, spook birds and can drive them away from their colonies for good if they occur at “just the wrong time,” said Mary Jane Schramm, spokeswoman for the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary.

But aircraft traffic in the area decreased last year by 24 percent — from 270 trips near the Slide in 2008 to 205 in 2009, according to the sanctuary.

The unusual breeding failure is leading some scientists to question whether climate change is to blame.

“The whole system is getting less and less predictable. ... We’re concerned for the whole future of (the colonies),” McChesney said.

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